



Christina Stead's *The Puzzleheaded Girl*: The Political Context

Michael Wilding

The fiction of Christina Stead (1902–83) is at last receiving something of its proper recognition after years of critical neglect, ascribed variously to her gender,¹ to her expatriate status (born in Australia and spending her creative life in Europe and America),² and to her left-wing politics.³ Her work is now being brought back into view within the general reappraisal of women writers and the extending of the canon of Australian literature. This essay explores her political vision with an examination of her volume of four novellas, *The Puzzleheaded Girl*. The collection of novellas, even more than the volume of stories, is most publishers' least favourite form. It has proved similarly unattractive to critical commentary. Yet so many fiction writers have felt most at their ease in the novella, enjoying the space for amplification denied in the short story and free from the necessity of the ramifications of complex plotting and narrative expected in the novel. The novellas in *The Puzzleheaded Girl* work not by conventional plot but by the great monologues her characters deliver and the obliquely realized, compulsive, seemingly unwilling, and unmotivated entanglements in which they live. Stead catches most remarkably the way people talk, and the way, talking, they reveal themselves, their sexual and political involvements and obsessions — though the characters themselves could never recognize them as obsessions. The world of intellectual, radical, fringe bohemian groups during the late 1940s and the McCarthyite period and its aftermath is effortlessly documented. None of the actions has that neat Jamesian form, but instead a succession of seemingly inconsequential events. It seems sometimes as if Christina Stead is writing a variation on, or descant to, material a more mundane writer would have treated naturalistically; though we could never reconstruct those ur-novellas. It is a manner that leads to a remarkable concision, an elliptical compression, resulting in a solidity and fulness free from any ponderousness; and from the elisions and ellipses retaining a powerful energy that imprints these stories on the memory.

¹Anne Summers, 'The Self Denied: Australian Women Writers — Their Image of Women', *Refractory Girl*, 2, 9–10 (1973), 10.

²Summers, 'The Self Denied'; Angela Carter, 'Unhappy Families' (review of Christina Stead, *The Beauties and Furies*), *London Review of Books* (16 September–6 October 1982), p. 11; reprinted in 'Introduction' to Christina Stead, *The Puzzleheaded Girl* (London, 1984), p. vii.

³Jose Yglesias, 'Marx as Muse' (review of Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children*), *The Nation* (New York, 5 April 1965), p. 370.

In attempting to characterize Christina Stead's writing it is possible to isolate certain basic, recurrent features. These qualities need to be dealt with linearly in a critical essay, but their order implies no priority or hierarchy. Indeed, we might well begin with this characteristic, that her work is non-hierarchical. As Diana Brydon, a critic sensitive to Christina Stead's radical politics, puts it, her

vision was essentially egalitarian. Not only men and women but the rich and the poor were also entitled to equal consideration in her eyes. She would allow no means of dividing beings from one another to diminish her respect for the humanity of each. No character is beneath her attention.⁴

Her characters are not ranked into major and minor characters. Characters come and go from the stories, and those that seem peripheral can often be found to have an importance unsuspected on their first introduction, while, conversely, those introduced early as if to be major participants can turn out to have only minor roles. As Angela Carter remarks, 'They can also slip through holes in the narrative and disappear.'⁵

The related point that needs to be stressed is that her fiction is character based. In response to Giulia Giuffré's question, 'While you are writing a novel, do you have a sense of the characters with you?' she replied, 'Definitely. I'm a character writer. Very strong sense.'⁶ And later in the same interview she remarked of her fiction, 'Every character has a factual basis.'⁷ Her interest is in humanity. And the characters portrayed are presented never as ciphers or symbols or components of a pattern, but as living people. Some are dealt with in detail, some are barely dealt with at all. Her fiction involves following threads of connexion between certain of the characters, but it is not always immediately clear which will be the focus of attention and which will turn out to be unexplored. 'The Puzzleheaded Girl' opens:

Debrett liked his job in the old-style German Bank in Broad Street, but he soon saw that the partners' sons were coming into the firm and he could not rise far; so he joined three friends of his, Arthur Good, Tom Zero and Saul Scott, who had just formed the Farmers' Utilities Corporation. They were all in their early twenties. (p. 11)⁸

⁴Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead* (London, 1987), p. 1.

⁵Carter, 'Unhappy Families', p. 11.

⁶Giulia Giuffré, 'Christina Stead', *Stand*, 23, 4 (1982), p. 23. See also Stead's statement to Jonah Raskin: 'I'm a psychological writer, and my drama is the drama of the person', in Jonah Raskin, 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', *London Magazine*, 9, 2 (February 1970), p. 75. See Denise Brown, 'Christina Stead's "Drama of the Person"', *Australian Literary Studies*, 13 (1987), 139-45.

⁷Giuffré, 'Christina Stead', p. 23.

⁸Christina Stead, *The Puzzleheaded Girl* (London, 1968). All quotations are from this edition.

And that is the last we hear of the German Bank and the partners' sons. Nor do we hear much of Debrett's three friends. The Farmers' Utilities Corporation staff are established by name:

The uniformed doorman, Fisher, was a retired policeman, who looked like a fine old small-town bouncer. The head clerk was Saul Scott's secretary, Vera Day, who was studying law; and the head typist was Maria Magna, business-like, impatient. (p. 11)

Yet the unfolding narrative has very little place for any of these people. A writer with a more conventionally aesthetic preoccupation, concerned with introducing only what will be developed, naming only those characters who will be given an active role in the narrative, would have deleted these details. But Stead's preoccupations were never of that narrowly aesthetic order: formal proportion, symbolic significance, all that Jamesian heritage, she ignored. Her starting point was firmly realist, firmly committed to a respect of human dignity. Characters were not counters to be moved around, merged, eliminated in the interests of art. Secretaries and doormen were named no less than protagonists since they were human beings, deserving the courtesy of human respect. She established her scenes with these assumptions. And from these followed the thread of her specific concerns.

'The Puzzleheaded Girl' deals with a girl who arrives asking for a job. Debrett interviews her.

He saw a diffident girl in a plain tan blouse, a tight navy-blue skirt, very short at a time when skirts were not short, round knees, worn walking shoes; she wore no overcoat. 'Miss Lawrence, come in.' She had a chin dimple and a dimple in her left cheek, a flittering smile; and when the smile went, her face returned to its gravity, its almost sadness. She had a full, youthful figure. She said she was eighteen. She sat down, keeping her knees together and holding her skirt on her knees with her brown purse. The little book she placed on the desk in front of her. It was a book in English on French symbolism. He looked at her face a moment before he began to question her. 'Surely Honor Lawrence is a New England name? It sounds like Beacon Hill,' and he laughed kindly in case it was not Beacon Hill. No answer. She said she had experience and wanted a good wage, and then she named a low wage and said she had no references. 'Only my schoolteacher.' 'Where was your last job?' After a pause, she said, 'I could start now if you liked.' Debrett engaged her. (p. 12)

The themes are captured immediately. The girl's attractiveness to men, and her fearful recoil; and the knees exposed by the unfashionably short skirt and kept close together, announce and redefine the sexual appeal as the vulnerability of poverty: something reinforced by her ignorance of the going wage, her vulnerability to exploitation, economic and sexual. Debrett compassionate, socialist — we are told

he is addressing a socialist group that night — hires her. Much later we learn from Debrett that 'I had a sister once. She died of tenement life; and I've never forgotten it. It haunts me' (pp. 37–38).

Christina Stead was acutely aware that the world of which she wrote was the world of class society. Class is a basic component of the creation of her realistic world. It is not always foregrounded, but it is always there. The development of 'The Puzzleheaded Girl' involves the discovery of who 'Honor Lawrence' is in class terms. Debrett has recognized the poverty but mistakenly categorizes her as from 'A poor, prudish New England family — well educated, spoke a choice English — New Englanders are poor too' (p. 13). When she visits Debrett, his friend Seymour, 'a dry, unforgiving and ribald bachelor' says 'sour with disapproval':

I never thought you would do that to Beatrice, Gus. It's unworthy of you both. A typist — a typist today is like a servant girl in your father's time. I'd watch my step if I were you. You would forfeit my entire respect. (p. 27)

Seymour, who makes no other appearance in the novella beyond this one episode, has already been placed in class terms, the tragedy of his own denials and delusions recorded without moral comment:

a New Jersey friend, born to the name of Goldentopf, recently changed to Seymour. Seymour was a tall, thin, fair North German type who thought he looked English. He was still living at home with his father, a wholesale butcher who made money; but he despised him, his brothers and sisters, the State of New Jersey and also the United States. 'There are natural aristocrats and natural butchers,' he said. He kept his gramophone and a large collection of records at Debrett's in New York and often went there to hear new music, and to conduct orchestral records with a baton. (p. 25)

Art as a substitute for insupportable life, as a vision of escape from class reality and poverty, is one of Stead's recurrent themes. Those characters of hers committed to art, to form, to style are generally deluded, confused. Honor Lawrence is like Seymour in this regard. She tells Debrett,

'I hate and despise business and anything to do with making money.'
'Do you think it's wrong?'
'It is the enemy of art.' (pp. 16–17)

But such a commitment to art involves a refusal to look directly at what is being rejected. It involves a flight into fantasy rather than a desire or attempt to change the corrupt social reality. Honor says to Debrett,

'In the Village, artists get along without money. They all help each other. It's a different kind of living. This is a terrible world here, everyone working for money, no one working for anything good.'
'My God, I think so myself. Things ought to be different; and one day they will be.' But as always, when a word was said that was, however remotely, challenging on social matters, she shut her mind. (p. 17)

The paradox of the socialist banker confronting the poor idealist is one that Stead gently and affectionately relished: Debrett is based on her husband, the Marxist economist and writer, William Blake. No less than Goldentopf-Seymour, Honor is concerned to turn away from her background and deny it. Not till half-way through the novella is Debrett able to establish her background; and he does so when her brother, a successful, rising New York artist, visits him and explains:

His name and his sister's was Tommaseo; they had changed to Lawrence. Their father was an Italian immigrant, at home a mason, here a man with fruit and vegetables on a barrow, who by hard work and cruel pinching had been able to rent a small store, where he sold seconds and rejects. This man had become a miser, a man who watched every bite they took, and shrieked, 'You're killing me, you're ruining me, don't eat so much'; horrible scenes, frightful gestures. When he went out he took the key with him and they waited for his return; either on the staircase or in neighbours' apartments. They scarcely ever bought anything. They dressed in cast-offs of tenement neighbours. (p. 36)

The deforming effects of poverty, of class society, was a theme of Stead's first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934). In 'The Puzzleheaded Girl' it is presented obliquely, the focus less on Honor's experiences than on the personality that has resulted and the effect that personality has on others, Debrett especially. In this way it links in with other themes and concerns of Stead's, in particular the family and sexuality.⁹

The family was always a concern of Stead's fiction, never something she was uncritically reverent before but always something problematic. In his review of her novel in *New Masses*, Isidor Schneider suggested that *The Man Who Loved Children* may in a sense be considered a novelization of Engels' *Origin of the Family*.¹⁰ The connexions are not so much in any specifics — matriarchy superseded by patriarchy with its development of private property and inheritance

⁹Ken Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature* (London, 1986), p. 103, stresses another of Stead's themes: 'But Stead is never nihilistic. Her characters believe in love, which she presents as a substitute religion, sustaining whether in delusion, hope or reality. More importantly, perhaps, her sense of there being no other sustaining force, and love itself operating only intermittently, leads her to her expressionistic construction, her de-emphasis on plot, and her poetic interweaving of lives and themes'. But to make this exclusive emphasis is to ignore the central sustaining force of her committed, left-wing political vision.

¹⁰Isidor Schneider, 'In the Bosom of the Bourgeois Family', *New Masses* (12 November 1940), p. 19.

— but in a strong sense that the nuclear family is but a momentary form, another transitional stage in an evolutionary process. It is not something to be glorified and enshrined as in bourgeois family chronicles; rather it is a state of being that is open — needs to be open — to the critical perspective.

In 'The Puzzleheaded Girl' it is not only Honor's family life that is hideous. Debrett's own family is a different sort of mess:

Debrett was a married bachelor. After work he walked the streets, went to a political club, a friend's house, or chess cafe on Second Avenue, to talk politics and have a cup of coffee. (p. 25)

The unsatisfactoriness of his marriage is established early on:

It was his habit to walk up and down, up and down and go to bed long after midnight. His wife Beatrice was up several times before that with the sickly child. He admired her uncomplaining devotion, he admired her and her mind; but he was irritated by the disorder. He had no sympathy with the child. But his wife had said, 'What did we get married for?' This was reasonable, customary. Yet he thought, 'If you loved me, you would not need anything else.' 'My life is empty,' she would say; 'marriage sucks life out of a woman.' She was not happy with the child, but she was busy, her life was not empty; and it seemed to him as if his life were empty. He felt he was not loved and never had been. 'She has been very patient with me, since she does not love me,' he said to himself. (pp. 13–14)

Beatrice's own family background offers nothing more satisfactory. She goes to stay with her mother but hates it there:

'Oh, you know how her vulgarity horrifies me: she's a noisy dictator. She has her slaves and maids and her truckling friends and even boy friends. Essentially, I married you to get away from it: and you keep suggesting I should go back. Why?' 'Well, Beatie, so you're glad to be home?' 'Yes, I am. It's lonely and miserable and isolated here and I never see you; but I'm not surrounded by drinking, card-playing barbarians screaming like hyenas at dirty jokes, all night.' He sat in thought for a moment and then began to read a political weekly which had come by the morning post. He cheered up and presently said, 'There's an excellent article here on Brazil.' (p. 29)

The collapse of Debrett's marriage, like so much else in these novellas, is noted in passing: 'Debrett had now left his wife . . .' (p. 56). Though it is not an event peripheral to the narrative of Honor Lawrence; for it is just the unfulfilling nature of that relationship that makes Debrett responsive to Honor's appeals over the years. But her appeals are asexual appeals — 'asexuality is an aspect of her general remoteness' as Joan Lidoff observes¹¹ — and she constantly recoils from sexual advances. Not that Debrett makes them; but his scrupulous avoidance of the sexual

¹¹Joan Lidoff, *Christina Stead* (New York, 1982), p. 168.

in dealing with her is something that underlines rather than denies some sexual fascination and preoccupation with her.

The crudity of male sexual harassment is one of the explicit, surface themes of the novella. Some clients of the Farmers' Utilities Corporation come to New York from Ohio and 'want someone to show them around, the theatre, a nightclub' (p. 18). Debrett refuses: 'You know what they want. They want an obscene show; that's what these hicks want in New York' (p. 18). Later one of them was

idling in the office, jaunty with the girls, when he passed his hand over Miss Lawrence's shoulder. She sprang at him and hit him with what she had in her hand — a file. (p. 20)

The sexism and predatoriness is all part of the milieu of the business Debrett is in, dislike it as he does. It is on a par with the general seediness of the company. Stead's sustained investigation of finance and banking, the novel *House of All Nations* (1938), is named after a Parisian brothel. The routine criminality of the banking enterprise is briefly indicated in 'The Puzzleheaded Girl':

The firm had begun honest and gained reputé, but was taking a short cut to riches, selling its stock and increasing the stock when necessary. It had entered upon fraud. Farmers, investors, small-townners, countryfolk who had invested in the firm, bought the stock and could not sell it back; this was illegal. But the company paid good dividends, kept straight accounts, and the legal situation, handled by Tom Zero and Saul Scott, was always unassailable. All these talented young men could have made money honestly; crooked money seemed gayer and cleverer. Debrett had no heart for it . . . he decided to move. (p. 32)

Honor's recoil from the corruptions of money making and seedy sexuality is paralleled by Debrett's own recoil. But whereas Debrett holds to a socialist vision, a vision of co-operation, Honor is entranced by an unreal, idealist vision of the purity of art and lives a practical existence of parasitism no more praiseworthy than the capitalist depredations of the bankers. The novella follows her appearances and disappearances over the course of years as she borrows, exploits, misleads: fearful of sexuality, yet half flirting with, and always recoiling from, a succession of men and women. As Angela Carter describes her, she 'is a drifter and a fantasist, a perennial virgin whose innocence is as strange as a perversion'.¹² Beatrice attempts to define her to Debrett:

'I very soon came to the conclusion that she knows nothing at all of the physical side of love, to give it a name.'

'Do you think that's possible?'

'It seems indefeasible,' she said: her eyes searched the room anxiously.

¹²Carter, 'Introduction' to *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, p. ix.

'Unlikely?' She stiffened. 'It doesn't seem likely, but it's the result of a subconscious taboo. It's a real part of feminine nature, Gus. Such girls exist everywhere. I understand it. What have the coarse facts about men and women to do with nice manners, a soft voice, correct speech, polite ways, feminine delicacy? A girl is pretty and sweet and naturally chaste; people tell her she's charming. How should she know it's all a masquerade?' (p. 50)

Beatrice understands it because of her own situation:

It was herself she had pity for: she was unhappy, in a trap. She had not wanted to marry, but to live like brother and sister with Debrett. When that became intolerable, she had agreed to an ordinary marriage, to avoid the disgrace of a break-up; but she could not endure married life, could not shut her eyes to the boredom and unfairness. (p. 51)

And it is Mari, with whom Debrett lives after leaving Beatrice, who has the final word about the girl:

'She's the ragged, wayward heart of woman that doesn't want to be caught and hasn't been caught,' said Mari, in her beautiful metallic voice. 'She never was in love.' (p. 67)

Joan Lidoff sees this description of Mari's as expressing 'the ultimate isolation of impenetrable individuality . . . an untouched separateness that is shared and human'.¹³ But it is Honor's very refusal to share, her denial of the co-operative principles represented by Debrett, that leads to her isolation; and that isolation is an ultimate only on the road of alienation. It may be the human condition under capitalism, but it is not at all Stead's vision of ultimate possibilities, certainly not what Lidoff calls 'an inevitable part of the human condition'.¹⁴

Although Mari is given the final word, the strength of these novellas is that there is no final word, no closure. The stories are never resolved; there is a constant charge of energy generated by the jarring, unreconciled elements. Writing of Marguerite Duras, Julia Kristeva has remarked on her 'aesthetic of awkwardness'.¹⁵ It is this very awkwardness of Christina Stead's aesthetic that embodies its life. The well-rounded, classically proportioned, above all resolved narrative is refused. As soon as one aspect is in place, another is disturbed. 'The Puzzleheaded Girl', like all these novellas, cannot be contained or summarized. The final dominant assertion is that of the uncomfortableness of life; the aesthetic is one

¹³Lidoff, *Christina Stead*, p. 169.

¹⁴Lidoff, *Christina Stead*, p. 169. Margaret Harris takes issue with Lidoff's exclusion of 'most of Stead's politics' in 'Writer and Reader', *Southerly*, 44 (1984), 234-35.

¹⁵Julia Kristeva, 'The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras', translated by Katharine A. Jensen, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 102 (1987), 140.

that insists on the dominance of life with its contradictions and tensions and anomalies that cannot be subordinated to form. The themes that we can indicate continue to reach out, they allow extension and development beyond the confines of the narrative, for the narrative is but a thread that runs amongst these multiple, unconcluded issues.

And themes spill over. The novellas are interrelated thematically. Christina Stead told Jonah Raskin, 'I think that the four stories fit together; they have a kind of unity'.¹⁶ The fearful recoil from sexuality, yet taunting and flirting with it, that is part of Honor Lawrence's behaviour, is something found in Lydia in 'The Dianas' and in Linda in 'Girl from the Beach'. The American expatriate European setting, touched on towards the end of 'The Puzzleheaded Girl', is likewise developed in those other two novellas. It is a setting Stead creates with remarkable freshness. From Henry James through the 'lost generation' of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach through Henry Miller, the American in Paris had become a set piece for fiction. All that is there, of course, unavoidably there in the context of 'The Dianas', and it asserts its unspoken force in this portrayal of Lydia's utter alienation, this total lack of artistic interest or engagement. Instead of the poverty of 'The Puzzleheaded Girl' we have wealth: Lydia is a privileged rich American. There is poverty around, of course; there always is, and Stead is not the sort or writer who pretends its absence:

The evening with her blind date was a dreary joke. He walked her to a small restaurant on a side street. She never went there, because it was full of poor, young Americans living in Paris, men who had been on the GI Bill of Rights and stayed on, others self-exiled, artists and their poor, young, thin, unfashionable wives. Some of them took just soup and bread. (p. 86)

Delusory as the artistic life may be, these 'poor, young Americans' at least have a commitment. What Lydia lacks, as placing her in this environment indicates, is commitment to anything. Angela Carter remarks of Lydia and of Linda in 'Girl from the Beach' that they are 'girls for whom to be abroad is to be relieved of all moral responsibility'.¹⁷ The time of the novella is, significantly, the period of 'commitment'. Paris at this historical moment was the site of the ideological battle in which commitment, 'the spirit of anti-fascist unity' of the war period, as Jack Lindsay has described it,¹⁸ was being confronted by the cold war apparatus concerned to break it down. Politics here, however, are implicit; though nonetheless forceful for that. Lydia's refusal of commitment in her ongoing

¹⁶Raskin, 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', p. 71.

¹⁷Carter, 'Introduction' to *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, p. ix.

¹⁸Jack Lindsay, 'Commitment', *Stand*, 21, 1 (1979-80), 39.

multiple, unconsummated flirtations is metaphoric of the United States' refusal of socialist commitment. Her ungrounded, drifting, empty-headed 'freedom' is the 'freedom' of the 'free market', fearful and imprisoning. It is emblemized in her preoccupation with the marriage market:

'You must bring something to marriage.'

'I bring twenty thousand dollars and a grand piano,' said Lydia with a soft breaking laugh. (pp. 76-77)

And her calculations about marriage involve money calculations about the quid pro quo for her capital contribution:

'You rely on your money for defence and fulfilment, and for vengeance . . . It's castration by money.'

'You mean I'm a miser,' she said with a tender laugh. 'Oh, perhaps I am. At least, you see, I must marry someone who can give me what I want. Why should I spoil my life? I don't want to get involved and then give some man twenty thousand dollars because I'm involved as a woman.' (p. 91)

The opening picture of Lydia establishes firmly that materialist, market base, the meaningless commodity purchases, tokens of living, the fetishistic substitutes that were to characterize the post-second world war society:

For aunts and cousins, friends, and her mother in New York, she had bought all at once, in an hour or two, four pairs of kid gloves, four bottles of perfume, a brooch, some Swiss handkerchiefs, some scarves and a handbag, all cheap and tasteless, and not at all what foreigners mean by French. She had gone into a large ordinary department store which she had laughed at in the days when she had been living in Paris in a small apartment with her mother. The articles now stood in their boxes and papers on the bed she had slept in and on the chairs. She had bought nothing for herself in Paris, but wore what she had worn in New York the summer before, a black chiffon dinner dress, bought on Fifth Avenue and imported from France, a green and white striped silk, some prints. She had brought with her for the summer in Paris, two steamer trunks and four valises. Most of her things she had never unpacked. They stood there locked for a while. Then it occurred to her that the maid might think she was afraid of theft, and she unlocked them. They stood there; and sometimes she lifted the lids, looked at what lay there, closed the lids again. (p. 71)

We do not need the designer labels, the department store name. It is enough that the point is made about the uninvolved token gift buying, and Lydia's privilege of comparative financial well being, the 'air of comfort, waste, expense, juvenile gaiety' (p. 71). More than that would be irrelevant, consumer preoccupation, commodity endorsement, which is absolutely not what Stead is about. What she is able to do is capture the confusions and contradictions in behaviour without sneering. In this she is so different from that commodity fetishist writing of the

nineteen sixties, seventies, and eighties, that brand-name identifying that in 'placing' characters reveals the status anxiety of the writer and exploits it in the reader. The labelling, obsessed, purportedly sociological fiction that lists with a curl of the lip the fashionable and not fashionable enough champagne, furniture, supermarket, reading matter, the acceptable and unacceptable in art, brands, and fads, is a fiction locked into its own targets, capitalizing on its readers' anxieties; it is what it condemns. But Stead never sneers, rarely moralizes: she is unconcerned about the 'life-style' icons. The moral failures of her characters are demonstrated in the way they treat each other, their partners, their children, their companions at work, their casual acquaintances. She presents character in action, morality applied and demonstrated, not labels. It is not just that her Australianness allowed her to be free from the omnipresent social snobberies of the English and the materialist consumerism of the American social commentators. Rather, it is her essential moral and political preoccupations, her concerns with the basic and essential, her impatience with irrelevance and externals, that ensure her focusing on the important and enduring aspects of character. She is able to treat her characters with a large empathy, a strong compassion, and an equally strong no-nonsense focusing on the moral bases of behaviour, interaction. We do not read her to find out how to be trendy, under the guise of reading how awful the trendy are: we read her to find out how to be true.

Lydia, living alone in her Paris hotel room, ventures out to flirt with man after man, and then recoils, runs off, leaves them waiting. The range of nationalities and classes — the Englishman, the French baron, the poor American at Unesco, the visiting American professor, the French intern — provides a variety that allows its socio-political implication. As Frederic Jameson has written of Wyndham Lewis's fiction,

the use of national types projects an essentially allegoric mode of representation, in which the individual characters figure those more abstract national characteristics which are read as their inner essence. In its simplest form, that of the contemplation of a single foreign national essence alone, such allegory often serves as the instrument of cultural critique.¹⁹

The cultural critique is part of the consistent political analysis that Stead offers. There is always the radical presence to remind us of radical contexts, radical interpretations.²⁰ Lydia's aunt who has so influenced the behaviour of Lydia and

¹⁹Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 90.

²⁰R. G. Geering records that 'This story was mangled when published by the *Saturday Evening Post* under the changed title of "The Huntress". In the course of abridgement most of the

her mother, was 'a political force, a union worker' (p. 90). But the foregrounded concern is the sexual, the disturbed sexuality neurotic in its manifestation. Writing of Duras, Kristeva indicates the way the political is rendered through the neurotic in post-war fiction:

The destruction of nature, of life and economic resources, is coupled with an outbreak, or simply a more potent manifestation, of the disorders that psychiatry has subtly diagnosed: psychosis, mania, borderline disorders, false personalities, and so on.

And she continues,

within the psychic microcosm of the subject, private pain absorbs political horror . . . public events are depicted through the prism of madness. In our time, the only event is human madness. Politics, especially in its murderous outbursts, is part of that madness.²¹

With Lydia we have the manifestly disturbed. The full blown episode that amplifies the detail of her other flirtations is the trip she takes to Chartres with the friend of her mother, a professor of psychology from upstate New York, 'a great flirt, gossip and backbiter' (p. 82). Lydia characterizes him: 'he's so silly. He's so portentous about sleeping with you. With girls. A professor, you know the sort' (p. 84). That he is a professor of psychology, yet is so unaware of the psychology of the women he tries to bed — Lydia's mother as well as Lydia — is another of Stead's amused observations; she was an instructor in psychology herself, at Teachers' College on Sydney University campus. She is clear-eyed about male predatoriness. But the focus is on Lydia's gamesplaying:

'You're surely not going to refuse?' said he.

'You're surely not going to force yourself on me?' she said. 'We're travelling together, my dear Russell, but we're not intimate. We're comrades, remember; we scarcely know each other though you're my mother's friend.'

'Are you kidding me?' he said. 'What do you think I came away with you for?'

'You're not going to get near me, you big ape,' she shrilled; and she was such a shrew that Russell quailed. He went out into the corridor and did not return for a long time. One of the maids became alarmed and the manager came upstairs. 'Are you the American who's walking up and down?' (p. 100)

uncomplimentary references to Americans abroad and certain passages central to the characterization of the heroine were omitted', R. G. Geering, *Christina Stead* (New York, 1969), p. 155.

²¹Kristeva, 'The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern Word: The Works of Marguerite Duras', pp. 138, 143.

And her treatment of Russell escalates, laying traps for him, deriding him for his lack of French, lack of money, lack of style:

'Must you behave like a hick, you fat porky hick? Just because you come from a fresh-water college you can't order wine?' (p. 102)
She merrily mocked him for his underwear, his heavy body, his hairy arms.
(p. 103)

It is a disturbing novella in its portrayal of the desperate cruelties played by desperate people, all the more disturbing in that the desperate people are ordinary people, representative people, victims of roles imposed on them by social desperation:

'What have I done? What is the matter with me?'
And in her mind she returned with weariness to the hideous fever of the man-woman struggle in New York, necessary, terrifying, endless, ugly. She had to take part again because she was a desirable girl, in the insatiable checked licence, checked by cunning and calculation; in the lascivious longing, squalid fun; go back to dissatisfaction and cynicism, horror and fear, doubting; every hour the prey of a mad Venus, cruel with delay.
(pp. 106-07)

'The Rightangled Creek' is subtitled 'a sort of ghost story', which inevitably provokes the question, what sort of ghost story? The first part of the novella, the narrative about the writer Laban Davies and his wife and son, appears on first impression to be totally materialist. There are no obvious spirits here, unless in the alcohol that Laban, on the wagon, craves and eventually vanishes in pursuit of. The first part has many of the recurrent themes we find in Stead's work: the recognition of class society and the deformations caused by poverty; and that sense of the ambiguous energies of political-literary intellectuals, the mixed motives, the innate contradictions that can generate a dialectical energy or, off balance, a self-destruction and destruction of others:

Laban was a self-taught man, a ditch-digger's son become a city desk man, turned to literature. Working with irritability, energy, spite, prejudice and vanity, and a nose for the trends, he had set up a remarkably wide circle of useful acquaintances in many countries. He brought out anthologies of writing in languages he could not read, re-translated famous works, wrote introductions to others; had built himself a solid reputation in America. These works were all potboilers; yet Laban had taste, judgement and cunning, and was a literary figure. (p. 121)

Laban is a characteristic Stead portrait, the compulsive talker, the self-preoccupied, self-justifying monologist, like Sam Pollitt in *The Man Who Loved Children* or Andrew Hawkins in *For Love Alone*. He typically and insensitively

talks about people who are present, forgetfully cruel in the careless way he analyses his wife to his visitor:

'That's what irritates me about Ruth's attitude. She quite openly thinks that I'm straining to get off the string. She doesn't understand that I'm thinking of her and Frankie day and night. She doesn't realize that no decent man would go away and leave them in a place like this, without a gate or fence, with all those doors and windows.' (p. 131)

At the paragraph's end we are shocked to find Ruth has been present the whole time. 'Well, I have to hang out the washing,' said Ruth; and she went out with the basket.' (p. 132).

The sexual politics are succinctly established, Ruth labouring to keep the household going. And as always with Stead, the portrayal of masculine tyrannies is not an end in itself but paralleled with the political tyrannies of the public world. The domestic is a microcosm of the international struggles against fascism, and she never privileges the one realm of struggle before the other. The revelation of Laban's ambiguous part in this ideological battle is one that links back in with the awareness of the deformations of poverty. The self-taught, self-made writer, in struggling free of the alienations of proletarianism, is all too vulnerable to the corruptions of power and money, duchessed by Il Duce. Launching into a tirade against those writers who had turned to support fascism, Laban, 'in his best mood, penetrating, considerate, balanced',

condemned the fascists and their 'watchdogs and lapdogs of the pen,' and he named names — all those who sold their pens. He showed how the ideas of the corporate state and of the brown-shirted horde were essentially incompatible with true writing. Of the four at the table, only Frankie did not know that upstairs in a velvet-lined case in a box was the jewelled cross on a ribbon; and that with it the former farmboy, following Ezra Pound to Italy, dreaming of glory, and flattered by the empty-heads around Mussolini, had acquired a title in a Fascist order. The honest radical scholar, the poor farmboy could not give up this secret jewel. (p. 137)

It is a chilling episode, given an especial horror in that disturbing use of 'named names', a phrase with the inevitable resonance of the 'House Committee on UnAmerican Activities' denunciations, the McCarthyite blacklists of the 1950s.²² Those were blacklists of the right against the left, but the phrase here underlines what is wrong in Laban's *ad hominem* tirade — uncharitable, ungenerous, witch-hunting and, of course as the 'jewelled cross' reveals, fuelled by the guilty secret of past collaboration.

²²The phrase is taken for a recent study of the HCUA: Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York, 1980). It recurs through Stead's novellas.

The explosive phrase is one of the consistent traces of a political vision that runs through Stead's fiction. A radical social analysis underpins all her work. In Thornton's account of this history of the house, the economic context is lightly but firmly established:

'Dilley was a shoemaker and sold leather goods; and durin' the war he got enough together to retire. They bought this place, which was a-goin' beggin', part paid for and part on mortgage; and thought they'd keep it for their only child Hilda for when she was married. Lambertville was better then than now, Lambertville's a half-ruined town. These factories along the Delaware closed down and the place never came back.' (p. 156)

And in this world of economic decay, the attempts to secure a material stability generate the ghost story; that is the 'sort of ghost story' that it is. The hopes the Dilleys vest in their daughter are shattered when she marries a young man from an army camp:

'Well, he was an ignorant man and he had a disease and he gave it to Hilda. She had a baby which died and that began to turn her mind; she used to cry for it.' (p. 157)

After deciding she is Pocahontas and attacking her mother with knives and a tomahawk, Hilda is incarcerated in a mental hospital and the house rented out, which is how Laban and family have come to be there. Laban and his wife similarly have all their hopes invested in their child:

The child developed his ideas. He listened in silent satisfaction, however, when his parents spoke about his future; but the reality of his genius, the certainty of his eminent future, was so often discussed and as a matter of course, that he had no fatuity. His future was a rather important fact in the future history of the country: he would possibly be President. (p. 126)

The socialist parents' hopes for their son are as materially based as the Dilleys' for their daughter. The mother declares,

'A boy like that especially must not be frustrated in any normal desire or deprived of any normal object. Satisfaction is release of energy, it is victory. That's why we want a good car for him, too. Here it's the symbol of achievement, it's the normal means of personal expression in this country; it's release of power for every individual; it means normal living. We were brought up with older symbols, symbols of poverty. But he must be normal in this age.' (pp. 126-27)

There is an evident degree of obsessiveness in this; but Stead is never narrow in her sympathies. The craziness has its all too real base. Ruth, the mother, says,

'You see, Laban knew what deprivation was. It didn't do him any good. It doesn't do any of us any good,' she said, beginning to weep suddenly, but still hurrying with her work. 'We blame Laban's troubles on his early frustrations: the struggle is too hard, too hard.' She turned her back to them and began vigorously washing pots and pans. (p. 127)

One of the characteristics about ghosts, about hauntings, is their association with material property. Ghosts are rarely found in working-class tenements, council houses, housing commission apartments. Ghosts are the dead still attached to materiality, the dead who will not surrender their earthly desires and still insist on hanging around the objects of their sensual delight. In 'The Rightangled Creek' the manifestations of the haunting are all associated with materialist preoccupations. The Dilleys' daughter, Hilda, is still alive in hospital. Whether the haunting is from her, or whether she is a victim of a previous haunting is left open. And our sense that there is a haunting develops only slowly. Angela Carter writes that 'when they [*i.e.*, Laban and family] vacate the house, friends move in and the haunting begins'.²³ But Laban's nightmares — 'I've dreamed that I've seen this place in flames' (p. 131) — although initially interpretable as the mark of the disturbed sleep of a disturbed psyche, related perhaps to the pressure of resisting alcohol, can be looked back on as the signs of the haunting. The dreams persist:

Laban broke into their usual political comment, 'You asked me about the pleasure of drink only yesterday; and today I can give you a good picture of it. Last night I dreamed I had taken a glass of the old poisonous slop I used to get as a boy on the farm'. (p. 135)

And just as the narrated dream disrupts the political discussion here, in the end the desire for alcohol breaks into the political commitment of Laban's writing, and he vanishes, off on a binge. The haunting has successfully worked on Laban to drive him out. At the end of the first part, Laban vanished, his wife and son departed too, the visitor, Sam, looks back at the place: 'I must remember how pretty it is; it's really enchanted; it smiles: it's a dream cottage. Clare would love it' (p. 146). But it is a dream cottage of Laban's horrendous nightmares, the enchantment is more literally true than he realizes, that it smiles is a mark of its satisfaction at successfully evicting Laban and family. When Sam shows it to Clare, she remarks, 'It's spellbound.' 'You mean you are?' 'No, it is.' 'Spellbound' (p. 148). These are the first unconscious verbal recognitions of the enchantment, the spell. But once moved in, Sam and Clare hear the footfalls on the stairs every night; they explain them, unconvincingly, as mice. Yet, initially, the horrors that finally drove out Laban — both his own dreams and the taunting visits from the destructive New

²³Carter, 'Introduction' to *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, p. x.

York literary drinking cronies — are absent. Laban had been markedly alienated from the rural environment:

'I hate digging; I'm an ex-farmboy. If I stop writing and do physical work, I become what I was, as a boy on the farm in Illinois, anxious, troubled, a sort of black sterile perpetual insomnia in the daytime'. (p. 129)

He is 'sarcastic about all his neighbours' (p. 123), cuts himself off from nature, from everything but his writing. 'Laban went straight from bed and table to his desk' (p. 122). Clare, however, surrenders herself to the environment:²⁴

She put out food for the animals, and pulled up no plants because each plant is shelter for some living thing. Once or twice, when alone, she herself lay down naked in the centre of the weed patch, to get all the sun, lay there drowsy thinking of fertility, surrounded by all the life and love of the beast and plant world, part of the earth life. (p. 162)

The idyll is disturbed by the arrival of urban intellectuals, the Jermyns — just as the carload of literati had disturbed Laban's fragile balance — who promptly decide to buy the place:

'You know Professor Abe Carter has collected funds for a writers' refuge? He's looking for a place. I can make something out of this idea. I'll get Carter to contribute some of the money he's collected, buy Dilley's place, call it Dilley's place, summer camp for writers, say there's a ghost — you have first option.' (p. 173)

That night Joyce Jermyn is kept awake by the footfalls, disturbed by the manifestations of nature, begins questioning her relationship with her husband, and the couple leave within a few days. But the scheme is underway; Bill Jermyn sends down two brothers, the Imbers, to look over the site:

As the villages in this part of the Delaware country declined in workers, and farmers, like the ten sons of Farmer Thornton, went farther out to the plains because of big-scale farming methods, the derelict farms and follies were becoming the homes of workers in the arts. Jermyn was shaping up his idea of planting small semi-socialist, self-dependent artistic communities. (p. 177)

²⁴R. G. Geering, however, interprets this negatively: 'Clare Parsons, whose love of nature and solitude is itself an uneasy indulgence, an obscure form of self-justification, gets more than she bargains for', *Christina Stead* (Melbourne, 1969), pp. 36–37. And Joan Lidoff *Christina Stead*, p. 171, sees 'sinister implications . . . within Clare's confident affirmations' that the place is like a Breughel painting.

The drive for material acquisition and a narrowly materialist alienation from nature combine to accelerate the catastrophe. The Imbers refuse to believe Clare's warning about poison ivy:

'Surely an intelligent woman like you doesn't believe that superstition! It's created by the imagination: it's psychosomatic. You fear it, so you get a rash, or whatever you want to get.' (p. 178)

Frederick rolls in it and dies 'a few days later' (p. 179). Clare decides she and Sam will make an offer for the house, slips, and breaks her arm. They return to the city.

The material hopes of the Dilleys in buying the property for their daughter, the hopes vested by Laban and Ruth in their son, and the desires of the caretaking Thorntons to take over the property for their daughter are, in their expression of the desire of possession, related to the ghostly possession — a provocation, perhaps. The Thorntons are willing to wait until Hilda dies: Thornton's 'Remember that poor girl is still alive. We won't touch it yet' (p. 180), are the last words of the novella. The image of the house readily embodies the values of the family, enshrines and encloses them; and in Stead's notation, the possessive family — possessive of its members and of its property — is a disturbed and disturbing phenomenon.

Laban's behaviour is explicable in terms of the archetype of the alcoholic writer. Hilda's madness can be explained by the disease, her child's death, and her husband's desertion. Imber's death can be explained by his own rigid false materialism, his foolhardy half-smart 'scientific' attitude, and what Joan Lidoff sees as the 'hubris' of his refusal 'to respect the power of nature'.²⁵ But the cumulative implication of these successive disasters is that there is some possession of the house. Clare and Sam seem to survive it by accepting, tolerating, not resisting the ghostly footfalls, though even here there is a significant absence: is Sam the writer doing any writing? We are never told. And when Clare breaks her arm the day she and Sam have written asking the price of the place, they leave. These events might all have happened separately, independently. There is no necessary connexion, it seems only sequence. Stead records, scrupulously without comment, and from the very scrupulousness, mysteriously; interpretation is avoided, causality not attributed.

The apparent inconsequentiality of sequence, the non-causal narrative, is characteristic of these novellas. Discontinuities, breaks, elisions, arbitrary transitions, disrupted events give the mood and tone. Actions are not over-determined, not dovetailed in. This is the modernist surface of Stead's writing, a great freedom from the unpersuasive over-explained causalities of the cabinet-made

²⁵Lidoff, *Christina Stead*, p. 170.

stories of conventional realism. The thread of trouble, the continuity of disaster here, is human acquisitiveness. It is not even portrayed as greed, as an excess of acquisitiveness. Acquisitiveness itself is enough. It is this rather than any traditional 'haunted house' explanation that is the ghost.²⁶ The insensitiveness of the acquisitive is given additional underlining by Bill Jermyn's brusque intrusion, his reduction of the mystery of the place to lack of oxygen, 'vapours' (p. 172), by his immediate crude trampling over the community: 'What I'd like to do is buy the place away from Thornton; he's after it for that sow daughter of his' (p. 173). The Imbers trample in with a lack of reverence before nature, the ecological environment, cutting new water courses. The narrative becomes perfunctory. The spell is not being broken, but the crudeness of the intruders is trampling over it, and the mysterious presence and mood is de-emphasized and not re-established. Clare's broken arm follows within eight lines of Imber's perfunctorily recorded death — a huge acceleration of pace after the slow brooding descriptions.

From the slow beginning with the leisurely, belated introduction of data, we have moved to the arrival of the brash materialists, insensitive to others; the insensitive 'semi-socialist' (p. 177) modernizing intrusions that introduce a new, crude, bullying fascism of behaviour that in other areas the intruders would be conscious of and oppose. Stead succinctly portrays the failures to achieve an expansive imagination, the failures to feel a true empathy in these characters. But it is not the failure of the communal principle in itself that she is asserting. What she shows are the limitations of professed socialists in action, in practice; these are fables for the already committed, critical within shared assumptions. She captures the crudeness and clumsiness of the half-aware, those aspects of radicalism that result in alienating others, that provoke resentment from those who could be allies to a true, fully-felt, thought-through socialism. There is a telling episode when Laban's twelve-year-old son denounces the local Austrian farmers as Bundists, telling some would-be purchaser not to buy eggs from these alleged fascist sympathizers. Sam is horrified:

'Well, by gum, Frankie,' said Sam, 'aren't you ashamed to take the bread out of people's mouths? What crust, my lad! You're a twelve-year-old school kid and you go running about ruining people's business and uttering threats.'
(p. 125)

²⁶The traditional haunted house explanation is offered by Geering: 'They all have different motives and they are all defeated by the house and its legacy of horror and evil', *Christina Stead* (Melbourne, 1969), p. 36. But we might remark of Stead as Lukacs did of Kafka: 'His ghosts belong to everyday bourgeois life; and, since this life itself is unreal, there is no need of supernatural ghosts à la Hoffman', George Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London, 1963), p. 52.

This insensitive, glib sloganizing is there again in the Jermyns and the Imbers. It was always a concern of Stead's work to show the contradictions, the inhumane aspects of the propagandists for humane ideologies. The critical purpose was to make the contradictions explicit so that the errors could be recognized and reformed; it was a critical perspective from within the left, not an attack on socialism.

Insensitivity is not, of course, the preserve of the would-be progressive or socialist. Exactly what George Paul's politics are in 'Girl from the Beach' is never quite clear. As a working journalist, the ambiguities are no doubt part of his professional stock in trade. Another of Stead's compulsive monologuists, his immediate insensitivity is the assumption that everyone is always ready and eager to hear the narration of his problems. And his problems predominantly involve continual recriminations with and about his ex-wives and the saga of his continual pursuit of young girls. There are two eponymous female protagonists in 'Girl from the Beach'; in part one, Barby, a girl he meets on the beach in California, in part two, Linda, who has grown up 'at the beach', a community of communists on the east coast. The repetition compulsion is one of George's defining characteristics. As a crime reporter he specializes in horrific murder cases involving young girls and has a huge collection of scene-of-the-crime photographs, obtained semi-legally and illegally. The potential for the exploration of some sexual weirdness is not developed. The poles of his obsessions are established, but the charge between them is left implicit, exercising its powerful force, nonetheless.

It is a novella set in the McCarthyite HCUA blacklist period and its aftermath, communists and communist sympathizers being denounced and dismissed from their jobs in Hollywood, in government, in education. George is being dragged into the witch hunt:

'My second wife Sully is going round telling all the editors that I'm a Red. I said to her Don't you want me to make money? She's dedicated! What a beautiful girl she was! One long fair curl hanging over her shoulder, braided trousers and a little white mess jacket and a soft peach face. Barby is collaborating with her in secret; though Barby is not such a fool. It's to annoy me,' he shouted. He sprang up. 'My God, in this country some schoolchild only has to say so, some peach-faced all-American child. I worked for the government in the war, I did real service. That makes me for her an undercover agent. Why am I a Red? I speak Russian for one thing'. (p. 197)

The first part of the novella is set in the Deans' New York apartment; at the end of it, we find Laura Dean packing, she and her husband about to leave the U.S.A. She has just had a visit from 'an old friend, a studio executive, a pretty little woman whom Alfred Hill had once admired', a woman who had 'given names' and who wanted 'to find out how she was now thought of in New York' (p. 210). The anti-

left hysteria has been touched on only obliquely, but it is pervasive; implicitly, that is why the Deans are leaving. The second part set in France has a comparable political hysteria: the resentments against those who had collaborated with the German occupying army in the 1940s and against those collaborating with the Americans in the 1950s. That these can be presented as parallel occupations is a part of Stead's absorption of a radical rhetoric and vision. George, who turns up to visit the Deans outside Paris, is

working on a feature story of the German occupation and had to come out to St. Germain-en-Laye where the German High Command had been quartered and where there had been built into a cliff a huge secret headquarters, fully provisioned, staffed, armed. It could still be seen. Everyone in St. Germain knew about it. Indeed they were full of information, since they had all served the German occupant in some manner. Some were friendly to the present occupiers, the Americans; some, like a certain cafe-owner whose cafe had been reconstructed with German money, did not try to conceal their bitterness at the good days gone. (pp. 226-27)

The subtext and context of the novella is political collaboration and betrayal, and all the resulting ambiguities. George turns his back on the French colonel and says, 'The kind of colonel who let in the Germans' (p. 227), but is in eager pursuit of a Mercedes-Benz, a car he will pay for by interviewing Easter Pascuale, an American gangster in Rome:

'He doesn't meet people; but I met him. And he isn't what they say. He told me everything. He's not engaged in drugs and prostitution. He had a big organization in the USA and part of it got involved with drugs and prostitution without his knowledge. He fired the goons who were in it; then they ganged up against him and someone informed. He gave it all up. He said I could have the whole story if I'd write the truth. He consented to give me three interviews to write the truth for the American press. I can sell it for six thousand dollars; and I can get my car then, I hate these little Renaults. I gave a deposit for a Jaguar, that's a British car; know the tester; and I couldn't bear to have a German car. But the Germans are an efficient people and no strikes. They only want to work. The French only want to strike and drink red wine. As soon as you strike a red wine country, even Alsace, you find they won't work. And you can tell them from the road' — he continued, his voice rising — 'from the car. They're red. They look red, red faces, red hands'. (p. 232)

The ambiguities, contradictions, and lies fill out this picture of 1950s repression. George, once in fear of being denounced as a communist red, now gets his denunciations in first with this tirade against the French as red wine drinking strikers. Not exactly denouncing them as communist, his rhetoric nonetheless allows that association and assumption; and the French post-war strikes were part of a communist drive. George's new alliance with a gangster embodies the alliance of United States anti-communist policy makers, overt and covert, with organized

crime; this was the period of the establishment of the French connexion, breaking the communist waterfront unions by employing organized crime, whose pay-off was a part in the drug traffic. This political context is touched on here, obliquely indicated in George's ceaseless babble.

In the U.S.A. the left is in disarray. Linda, daughter of one of the Deans' radical friends, visits, and Martin Dean asks about news from her parents. Angela Carter writes that the Deans 'speak of the struggle . . . with infinite nostalgia', but that implicit dismissal in 'nostalgia' is a false account of Martin's enduring engagement.²⁷ Nor is Carter correct in referring to 'that lost cause, the American left', in this context.²⁸ The cause was in disarray during these cold war years, but was never conceived of as in any way 'lost' by Stead:

'What do they say politically?' inquired Martin. 'What is the meaning of this silence? From the time of the Rosenbergs onward, letters to me from the USA say nothing political. Aren't they interested? Are they afraid? Have they no idea how to describe it? Has it knocked them cold? In spite of all the years of McCarthyism I know they were never prepared for anything. They were babies compared with the Europeans. They never believed it could happen there. What do your parents say?' She walked alongside them for a while, musing, then, 'They don't mention it'.

'And the thousands who lost their jobs, or never got any and those who were denounced and driven out — what do they do? How do they live? Do their friends stand by them or are they afraid?'

'I've never heard of them,' she said thoughtfully. 'I don't know what they do. I suppose it's hard for them.' (p. 214)

Later, Linda tells how her mother has abandoned radical politics and advised her to do the same. 'My mother wrote to me to keep out of it. She said, Be a vegetable' (p. 219). And she summarizes her mother's political surrender:

'Mother said she's been mistaken all along. Mother thought communism was a popular movement, that they were a sort of national movement. At the Beach everyone was a Communist. You said hello to anyone, because he'd be one of us. But then Mother saw how they were hated, that they didn't correspond to any national aspiration or any popular feeling, and she left. She said what was the purpose of belonging to something that wasn't a part of the American people.' (p. 220)

These political notes, as in all the novellas, take only a small part of the story. But they set the tone and offer a key to the narratives. The hounding of George by his ex-wives, and the hounding, the relentless pursuing of women by George, provide the predominant action; and this, in its turn, offers a parallel to the political hounding of the left in these cold war, blacklist times. The pack of literati who

²⁷Carter, 'Introduction' to *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, p. xi.

²⁸Carter, 'Introduction' to *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, p. xii.

break in on George at the Deans' offer a model of how the liberal intelligentsia participated in the witch hunts: 'Mancando, a liberal-minded polished literary man who thought literary people had the right to do anything, led the insults; the others, without his talent, tried and failed' (p. 207). They are like that other vicious pack of literati in 'The Rightangled Creek'.

The political harassing and blacklisting is the taboo theme: how supposedly reasonable, cultured, artistic, literary progressive people can participate in this is what implicitly the story explores. This is the meaning of the bullying, insensitive behaviour — George himself descending on the Deans and monologuing, verbally barraging them. The complicity of the intelligentsia and literati with the forces of repression is tellingly indicated: George collaborates with the police to get his crime stories; when his ex-wife Barby demands back the photographs, she claims, 'These photographs belong to me; I had to kiss cops to get them' (p. 205). We are never told exactly what these photographs show, and the significant absence allows them to represent, in the political context of this cold war story, an emblemized social and political atrocity. It is a world permeated by political paranoidias. George had 'a poor opinion of hotel-keepers, knowing that most of them were informers, had to be, had a police function' (p. 263). As well as collaboration, there is suppression. George backs off the big murder case he is covering:

'I kept out of it. I didn't want to end up a trunk murder; and there was that in it. Too many foreign services. I have to dig out the bones, name names or I have no following; and I couldn't do that. I could have made thousands. I hate all this; I hate murder; but it is my business.'

'You once taught history in a university,' said Martin, with slight reproach. (p. 269)

George's pursuit of Linda offers the sad picture of the effectiveness of the repression of the left. Whatever commitments he might have had — presumably there was some basis to the threat to denounce him as a 'red' — George's preoccupations now are fixated on his Mercedes and young girls. While Linda, taking her mother's advice to 'be a vegetable' (p. 219), avoids politics and drifts round Paris occasionally singing in clubs songs learned from her I.W.W. father:

'I sing Union songs and campfire songs to young French people. I call them American folksongs. But there's no build-up, no explanation, because I don't know the French words. I give a little talk, but in English. I just have to give it to them cold and it's hard to put over. They try me once or twice and then they don't want me because they don't understand.'

'Couldn't you work it out with friends, tell them what it's about?'

'Oh, they'd find out they're radical songs and the proprietor mightn't like that.'

'They're radical here.'

'Oh, I don't want to get known as someone singing American radical songs over here. I don't want to get a record. I might want a clearance some day.'

I have friends in Heidelberg. They had to get clearances. Even in New York you have to have a clearance. That's why I started working for Dad.' 'Couldn't you get a clearance?' 'Oh, you know — at the Beach,' she began to laugh affectionately, 'there wasn't anyone who could get a clearance. You would have to give names to get a clearance.' (p. 247)

These political details are the backdrop, the context, the frame for the sexual obsessions and anxieties of George and Linda. In part, sexuality becomes a displacement of social issues. George's newspaper reporting provides the sex sensationalism to displace authentic political news. It is a meaningless flurry of pursuit and evasion, Linda no less preoccupied, centreless, than George. Sexuality is central for her flirtations, but she is always evading it, fearful of it. Yet neither she nor George has any other centre left.²⁹

One of the characteristics of modernism is discontinuity. The narrative flow of classic realism represented an ordered causality. Rejecting the flow meant a rejection of that concept of causality — either to argue that there were other causalities, which narrative obscured, or that there were no causalities, all was random. The political implications of realism, the radicalism implicit in realism's refusal of the mystifications of romanticism or the authoritarian hierarchies of classicism, were thus confronted by modernism; and modernism, by being modern, was able to imply that realism was the form of a past age, was superseded as a mode of perception for the mid-twentieth century. The significance of Christina Stead's work in this aesthetic-political confrontation lies in her success in appropriating some of the formal innovation of modernism for a still firmly radical and realist fiction.

The discontinuities are immediately apparent. Lorna Tracy indicates them in 'The Rightangled Creek':

she devotes herself to the delineation of a tragically deluded family that drives off in the middle of the narrative and is scarcely referred to again. The story reinhabits itself with another set of human beings and starts over. But starts over in only one sense, for 'The Rightangled Creek' is as much as anything else about the character of a dell in summer.³⁰

In 'Girl from the Beach' there is no immediately clear narrative line. We have a series of monologues from George Paul about the young girls and ex-wives that

²⁹Diana Brydon points out the parallel between the McCarthyite and sexual betrayals: 'Linda's story is complicated by its interweaving with the persecutions of the McCarthyite era, in which friends "gave names" to save themselves. Linda's personal history contains similar betrayals. As a nine-year-old girl she was raped by a friend of her parents at their place on the beach', *Christina Stead*, p. 121.

³⁰Lorna Tracy, 'The Virtue of the Story', *Stand*, 23, 4 (1982), 52.

preoccupy him. We never encounter Renee, the young girl about whom he talks endlessly. At the end of the first part a friend of the Deans, in whose apartment George has been talking, is introduced for the first time; and in the second part this friend's daughter visits the Deans, now settled in Paris. After telling them inconsequentially of the inconsequentiality of her life, Linda leaves; George Paul reappears, pouring out his troubles yet again; and when Linda revisits the Deans she meets George, and the remainder of the novella deals with her becoming the latest of George's succession of obsessive pursuits. Where Stead departs from traditional realism is in having no clear narrative line and no traditional subordination of hierarchy of characters.³¹ It is not clear whether the novella will focus on George or on the Deans; it is not clear whether George's obsessions will illuminate or affect the Deans' relationship, or whether the Deans are to have no narrative role, but exist essentially as 'ficelles', as Henry James described the function of Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors*.³² And whereas *The Ambassadors* offered a vision of Paris subordinated to an overall imposed priority of perceivable aesthetic pattern, the classic hour-glass shape remarked by E. M. Forster,³³ 'Girl from the Beach' determinedly resists any such recognizable shape or patterning. The impression we receive is of the deliberate fracturing or refusal or ignoring of superimposed pattern. The conventions of realism, the taboo against introducing a new character at the end of a section, and, even more taboo, not doing anything else with the character except for a belated passing mention, are utterly affronted. The lack of perceivable observed proportion or balance refuses any paraphrasable or describable shape. We can perceive asymmetry; though even so, it is not an asymmetry that can easily be diagrammatized. The conveyed impression is of the observation of a full but only partially recorded reality, a selection made with other priorities than traditional aesthetic pattern. Alongside and related to this is the variable pace of the narratives. Leisurely beginnings establish settings, milieux, relationships; then successive incidents are dealt with at a different tempo, with different allocations of space, often concluding with an accelerating and almost perfunctory haste. Lydia's

³¹As Lorna Tracy puts it, 'Stead exploits the randomness of actuality and the now-conventional inadmissibility of coincidence into "the best plots"'. Hers is not the way of the Modernists nor is it quite the way of "the nineteenth century novel" which Stead's in some respects resemble'. 'The Virtue of the Story', p. 53. Ian Reid has a valuable discussion of the structure of 'The Rightangled Creek' in 'Form and Expectation in Christina Stead's novellas', *The Literary Criterion*, 15 (1980), 48-58. He remarks: 'The consistent pattern, then, traced in this novella is one in which the orderings of culture (the house, but also domestic arrangements and literary enterprises — Laban's and Sam's books, Bill's scheme of "a summer camp for writers") are partly subverted by the inchoate impulses that emanate from the fertile and fluid natural surroundings. This process is enacted by a narrative structure whose development is correspondingly insidious' (p. 55).

³²Henry James, 'Preface' (1909) to *The Ambassadors* (1902), (New York, 1960), pp. xx-xxi.

³³E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927; republished, Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 154-62.

meeting and marriage with the young man that concludes 'The Dianas' takes only two pages. The perfunctoriness is astounding, since the bulk of the forty pages of the novella deal with Lydia's flirtations with and rejection of men, her pattern of attraction and recoil. In 'The Rightangled Creek' the death of Imber from the poison ivy and Clare's falling and breaking her arm occupy barely a dozen lines, and within a page and a half the sixty-five page novella is suddenly concluded.

These asymmetries, these seeming disproportions, achieve their powerful estranging effects. Instead of the comfortable unrolling and wrapping up of narrative at a regular and predictable pace, we are hurtled into endings that jar us into reassessments, reappraisals; reassessments and reappraisals of what, in effect, the novellas are about. The apparently central concerns have been decentered, the familiar movement towards closure has been fractured. In this way Stead effectively defamiliarizes her materials, denies the reader's easy expectations. And it is not a matter of external techniques. These are not devices applied: she is no academic modernist. As Angela Carter put it,

she patently does not subscribe to any metaphysics of the Word. The work of her maturity is a constant, agitated reflection upon our experience in this world. For her, language is not an end-in-itself in the current post-modernist, or 'mannerist' mode, but a mere tool and a tool she increasingly uses to hew her material more and more roughly.³⁴

The fissures and elisions and leaps and disruptions arise from Stead's perceived sense of the significance of the material. These are not patterns or non-patterns. She was never a formalist. The impetus always came from the materials, from her sense of the discovered significance of portrayed human behaviour. Her impulses were always firmly realist, and her rejection of narrative pattern — though not of narrative flow, which she marvellously sustained — came from her commitment to rendering and revealing human motivation and behaviour. When she seems perfunctory, it is because she was perfunctory, because the interesting and significant had been presented, and there was no need for mechanical rounding off, for the tedious expenditure of time on some irrelevant expectation of the rhythm of closure.

The asymmetries and awkwardnesses, the lack of expected hierarchies of character, the modernist surface to realist concerns, and the puzzling, winding narratives had made Stead's work problematical and difficult for literary critics. The fictions are absorbing and enjoyable to read but difficult to abstract and discuss. The concern of this essay has been to draw out the political, to isolate components that indicate a coherent left-wing vision in her work. Her aesthetic has not been

³⁴Carter, 'Introduction' to *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, p. xi.

obviously programmatic, and her work has rarely, if ever, been discussed in studies of Marxist writing. Yet, 'Marxist ideas', as Jose Yglesias has noted, 'are inseparable from Stead's literary vision'.³⁵ Her concern was with issues rather than with form, and she is not obviously conscriptible into the various debates about Marxist aesthetics. Her ongoing concern with social justice, her marriage with the Marxist novelist and economist, William Blake, and her life for many years in predominantly progressive, radical milieux were, however, the shaping influences on her thought and art.

³⁵Yglesias, 'Marx and Muse', p. 370. And see Anita Segerberg, 'The Emergence of Christina Stead's Early Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies*, 13 (1987), 136: 'Critics have debated whether Stead was motivated mainly by ideological or by moral concerns. Did she create her characters as vehicles for her political views, or did she simply start with ideas of personality (often people she knew) and try to portray them as faithfully as she could? The answer, based on her early writing and especially on her unpublished work, would certainly be that ideology was her primary, initial concern — although she probably always tried to do justice to both'.